



Reflection for the Solemnity of Christ the King 26 November 2023

Mgr Daniel McHugh

“The Lord will bless his people with peace”

(Psalm 28)

Some time ago I visited the beautiful town of Lucca which is not far from Pisa in Tuscany, Italy (it isn't far either from the renowned coastal National Park of Cinque Terre). But, I have to confess I didn't know that it is the place that is home to the “Volto Santo” (the Holy Face) of Lucca. This wooden Crucifix in the Romanesque style is housed in a small Temple within the Cathedral. Twice a year on 3 May and 14 September (the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross) the Volto Santo is dressed up in precious garments testifying to the veneration Lucca has always shown to its “King”. The celebrations include a huge Candlelit Procession which draws people from far and wide on the Solemnity of the Exaltation of the Cross. The legend is that the Volto Santo was discovered in a cave in the Holy Land and was first carried to the Port of Luni in a boat. It was carried by cart to Lucca: when the people saw the Holy Face they wept tears of joy and cried “Gloria in Excelsis”. This was in the 8th century. It is said that William II of England swore the customary oath “By the Face of Lucca”. It is a beautiful 8 foot Crucifix with the Crucified Lord in a long robe and a Crown on His head.

This image of the Crucified King comes to my mind on the Solemnity of Christ the King because this is the type of King He is for us. In the Gospel reading for the Solemnity Jesus identifies Himself with the least ones. In accepting death on the Cross Jesus shows Himself to be one of the hungry, the naked, the ill and the imprisoned. As I watched the midday news this Wednesday 22 November I was blessed to see a short report of a group of families who have gone to Rome to see the Pope from the Kibbutz where Hamas slaughtered, violated and took prisoners on 7 October. It is a shocking story and what has happened since in Gaza continues the horror that was perpetrated on the Cross over 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. At a Press Conference in Rome the people of the Kibbutz speak of their pain at what happened on 7 October: they recognise the pain of Palestinians in Gaza too; their own pain was expressed in personal testimonies: the suffering of the families – they don't know what happened to loved ones taken away by the terrorists; have they got food, have they got medicine, are they injured? In the Vlog Burning Bush for this weekend there are 2 pictures: one of the Volto Santo, the other “The Scream” by Munch. This painting expresses so well the anxiety and pain of humanity in so many parts of the world. As I write this Reflection it is Red Wednesday, the Day promoted by Aid to the Church in Need, where buildings are lit up in red to draw attention to the horror perpetrated against Christians, particularly in Nigeria in these days. It was especially encouraging to hear the Prime Minister say in Prime Minister

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



Questions that Government Buildings are being lit up today in solidarity with those suffering for their Faith.

Jesus says in the Gospel for the Solemnity *"I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me"*. Pope Francis met groups from Israel and Gaza today. He is reported on X as saying *"The Palestinian people and the people of Israel have the right to live in peace: two fraternal peoples. Let us pray together for peace in the Holy Land, so that disputes may be resolved through dialogue and through negotiations, and not with a mountain of dead on each side."* At the General Audience he said *"Christians must be courageous instruments of inclusive love."* He highlighted the universal nature of the Christian Proclamation, emphasising that encountering Jesus and sharing the Gospel is a call for all irrespective of boundaries and limitations. Referring to *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope said *"let us feel that we are at the service of the universal destination of the Gospel; and let us distinguish ourselves for our capacity to come out of ourselves, to overcome every limit."*

This to me is especially true of the Mystery of the Cross: of the One who became a human being to share our lives, even going through our suffering and pain even to death. On the Cross we see love poured out; in venerating it we also see, as St Paul says in Corinthians on this Solemnity: *"Christ has been raised from the dead all men will be bought to life in Christ."*

This hope and trust in a new life must not be kept to ourselves. It is on this Solemnity of Christ the King that the words of Psalm 28 are realised *"The Lord will bless his people with peace"* – the words for our Reflection in the Communion Antiphon; words to take with us as we leave Mass with the Sign of the Cross.

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